1 4 APR 1975

MEMORANDUM FOR: Harry S. White, Jr.
                 Associate Director for ADP Standards
                 Institute for Computer Science and Technology
                 National Bureau of Standards
                 Washington, D. C.   20234

SUBJECT   : Standards for Country Codes

1. This memorandum responds to your 7 March 1975
request for comments on the actions being proposed
in a revision of FIPS 10-1 which relate to the international
codes for the representation of names of countries
recently adopted by the International Organization
for Standardization (ISO) as ISO 3166-1974.

2. The Central Intelligence Agency implemented
FIPS 10 in 1971 at considerable cost. We intend to
continue its use as the standard for Countries, Dependencies,
and Areas of Special Sovereignty for our computer-based
document storage and retrieval systems and for the
automated dissemination of documents. We have made
this decision because the ISO code does not represent,
as does FIPS 10-1, certain areas which are important
to the Agency's information processing effort; because
we do not foresee our involvement in any international
exchange of data; and because we do not wish to incur
heavy conversion costs again without deriving some
compensating benefits. For these reasons, the continued
maintenance and publication of the codes in FIPS 10-
1 is of substantial interest to us.

3. CIA is not in favor of publishing ISO 3166
in any revision of FIPS 10-1. A publication that contains
three alternative coding standards for a single area,
with each Federal user deciding which particular standard
code best meets its need, will produce such confusion
that the exchange of data cannot be accomplished effectively.

SUBJECT: Standards for Country Codes

This approach appears to us to be unworkable. CIA
prefers that the ISO codes be announced in a separate
publication as a voluntary data standard. The implementation
of FIPS 10 by CIA and other members of the Intelligence
Community has facilitated the exchange of machine-readable
data bases. It now becomes important to the Agency
that at least the Intelligence Community components
of the federal government retain FIPS 10 as their standard
for country codes.

4.   The proposal that those who have already implemented
the existing FIPS 10-1 codes consider the extent to
which they are (or may be) involved in the exchange
of data on an international basis, and then decide
whether to adopt the ISO code or continue to use the
existing code and convert whenever international interchange
is necessary, does not seem to us to be a viable solution
since many of the ISO and FIPS 10 codes do not equate
on a one-to-one basis. If it is feasible to produce
an equivalency table, we would welcome such action
by the National Bureau of Standards. The availability
of such a table could then be noted in a revision of
FIPS 10-1 with an announcement of the existence of
the voluntary ISO code for those who need the international
standard. Certainly, any action that facilitates the
exchange of data is important and will receive CIA
support.

STATINTL

Deputy Director of Joint Computer Support

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Bureau of Standards
Washington, D.C. 20234

Institute for Computer
Sciences and Technology

1975 March 7

MEMORANDUM FOR Data Standards Points of Contact

From: Harry S. White, Jr., Associate Director
        for ADP Standards

Subject: Standards for Country Codes

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) recently
adopted ISO Standard 3166, Codes for the representation of names of
countries (copy attached). This standard is already being adopted
for use in commercial applications involving the international
exchange of data. The banking and transportation industries are
planning to implement this standard in international interchange
within the next year.

In reviewing the codes in this standard, you will observe that in
many instances they differ from those in FIPS 10-1. During the
development of this International Standard, the FIPS 10-1 entity and
code lists were submitted by the U.S. delegation for consideration
as a basis for the ISO Standard. Other countries and international
organizations also submitted proposals. Our FIPS 10-1 was selected
as the base working document for use in the development of the ISO
Standard.

However, during the development phase, two major factors became
apparent:

(1) FIPS 10-1 codes were derived based upon the English names
    of countries (e.g., Spain is coded SP). Internationally,
    in many cases, this proved unacceptable and caused problems
    in that the original names of countries are not always
    English based (e.g., in Spanish, Spain is Espa.o). The
    international standards group decided that in certain
    instances the resulting standard would have to be derived
    from the common languages in the countries involved.

(2) There also existed a standard code widely used for identifying the country in which automobiles are licensed. This code, established under the Convention on Road Traffic and commonly displayed on a small oval black on white panel on automobiles, had a variable length structure of one to three characters. Although it was agreed that a fixed length code was essential to afford maximum reliability in data processing and telecommunications interchanges of data, it was decided to use the common Road Traffic codes to the extent possible, as this would cause the least amount of confusion and impact to the countries involved.

The standard was drafted based on these principles and has been officially coordinated through the United Nations and the Member Bodies of ISO. After five years of continuing effort, an International Standard has finally been achieved.

In 1970, when FIPS 10 was approved for Federal government use by the Director, Office of Management and Budget, it was recognized that this code was needed for Federal purposes at the time, but that future national and international standards, as they became available, would need to be considered for Federal use as well.

Nationally, the codes in ISO Standard 3166 have been proposed for adoption as an American National Standard under the voluntary industry standards activities of the American National Standards Institute. This proposal is now in the final phases of becoming a National Standard.

Accordingly, we are considering the following actions relating to standards for country codes:

(1) In the next revision of FIPS 10, the international codes contained in ISO 3166 would be included in addition to the existing FIPS codes. Federal users, depending on their specific application requirements, would decide on the particular standard code most effective in performing their mission responsibilities. Those having already implemented the existing FIPS 10-1 codes would need to consider the extent to which they are or may be involved in the exchange of data on an international basis and then decide whether to adopt the ISO codes or continue to use the existing codes and convert whenever international interchange is necessary. Users not involved in the international exchange of data could continue to use the existing codes as long as these are determined to effectively satisfy mission requirements.

(2) The existing codes in FIPS 10-1 would continue to be maintained and published as long as there are recognized and valid requirements for their use.

This approach to standards may seem like a departure from mandatory standards where there is only one or limited options. However, it must be recognized that in cases where Federal standards are adopted ahead of national and international standards, there are problems involved. When national and international standards are adopted that differ from Federal standards, practical decisions have to be made as to how best to continue. In this particular case, the approach suggested is to allow Federal users to decide among the standard codes which is best suited for their needs.

The purpose of this memorandum is to obtain comments from Federal departments and agencies as to this approach so that we can consider any problems involved before taking further actions. Comments are requested by April 1, 1975. Concurrence with the suggested approach will be assumed if no response is received.

Attachment

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